

Anger and Disassociation

Dissociation, as a concept that has been developed over time, is any of a wide array of experiences, ranging from a mild emotional detachment from the immediate surroundings, to a more severe disconnection from physical and emotional experiences.

Harlow Broomes wrote:

There are different levels of negative emotions. First there those directly associated with trauma and abandonment, like shame, guilt, apathy and fear. In these the person feels, thinks and acts from a 'not OK' position. Trauma and abandonment are immediately experienced and the person feels excluded from the community (first order dissociation). In these emotions, the person is frozen, *passive*.

In the second level of negative emotions the o.k. position is reversed: 'I'm o.k., and you're not.' This is the specter of anger, rage, arrogance and pride. The behavior is dominant, and my feelings are associated with your faults. We call this second order dissociation, and the corresponding behavior is *active*.

If we look at these patterns more closely, we can discover easily that the second level is a compensation of the first one, a creative adjustment to the fact that the emotions on the first level are simply unbearable. The child, observes the behavior of its parent, sees that the other person does not suffer and borrows the pattern as a solution to escape from the distress and the pain of abandonment, as soon as he's strong enough. Thus beaten children become beating fathers.

Anger and pride are relatively pleasant emotions, compared to those associated with first order dissociation. The person feels entitled to aggressively defend what they consider as invaded boundaries and can even be proud of that aggression. We can observe a lot of this kind of behavior at this moment in the history of the world.

However, and the Child ego state mentioned before comes in here: As 'adults' these people carry the suppressed anger and rage from their childhood into the open, to defend against the underlying trauma. That will work as long as someone else is willing to accept anger and adjust to it (children, spouses, employees), but the original 'solution' will turn into a problem if the other person is a healthy adult who asks 'Why are you so angry?' from a position of 'I'm o.k. – You're o.k.'

The moment in which the emotions and the behavior originating from second order dissociation are successfully confronted, everything will change. The solution becomes the problem ('I've beaten my own child') and the shame and guilt of first order dissociation will be reactivated as seemingly relevant for the current environment. In fact these emotions are re-enactments of the original 'I'm not o.k. – You're o.k.' position, or even the desperate 'I'm not o.k. – You're not o.k.'

In a nutshell:

First order dissociation: 'I'm in pain.'

Second order dissociation: 'I'm angry because I'm hurt.'

Third order dissociation: 'I'm in pain because I'm angry.'

My guess is that 85% of all cases of anger are cases of second order dissociation, not a real defense against real intruders. That anger may have been justified for the situation the person has lived through as a child, but it is totally irrelevant with respect to real people in the real *present*.

One way to address this is searching for the grandiose fantasy behind the anger. An easy example of this is road rage: If I get angry at another car driver on the road (he drives too slow or too fast) this means that I'm having a fantasy that the road is mine and that the other person is invading my space. I'm o.k., and he's not. Recovery means to resolve the rage and let the insight emerge that the road is there to share. Another fantasy connected to road rage is that people should behave rationally, like me.

A recurring grandiose fantasy is that those around me as an adult should meet the needs that my parents did not fulfill for me as a child. This never happens.

From Susan Peabody:

When a person is angry because of disassociation, it is very hard to confront him. It is best to wait until he, or she, has calmed down and return to his Adult personality (if he has one).

There is really no cure for disassociation but it can help if the disassociated person gets into therapy or recovery and begins to recognize that he is beginning to disassociate and try to nip in the bud. Continued awareness is the beginning of change as I mention in my book, *The Art of Changing*.

As some point the person in recovery can see the rage coming on and stop. This takes a lot of maturity and some people never make it this far. They end up in prison or in the mental hospital.

If you have someone in your life that disassociates there is not much you can do except pray for them and take care of yourself. Let go of any toxic guilt that you may have and try to get on with your life.

Finally, I would like to add that many people are both passive and active. In other words, some people rage to cover their shame and others feel the shame and stuff their anger. They end up being codependent. Both can be a handicap for us in our adult life and should be treated in both therapy and support groups.